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SUBJECT: VISITING A/S SAUERBREY MEETS WITH UN, NGOS IN
DAMASCUS

REF: DAMASCUS 0258

11. (U) SUMMARY: During her March 11-13 visit to Damascus, visiting Assistant Secretary Ellen Sauerbrey attended a UNHCR briefing on Iraqi refugees, a UNHCR-sponsored roundtable with its four implementing NGO partners in Syria, a briefing hosted by Charge for resident Ambassadors and visiting UNHCR Director of International Protection Services George Okoth-Obbo, and a dinner hosted by Charge for representatives from UN agencies and other international organizations in Syria. Conversations focused on the vast needs of displaced Iraqis here and possible avenues to overcome systemic political and bureaucratic obstacles, which hinder the channeling of aid to needy Iraqis in Syria. A/S Sauerbrey's official meeting is reported ref A. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) Assistant Secretary for Population, Refugees and Migration Ellen Sauerbrey visited Damascus March 11-13. Her trip to Syria corresponded with that of Geneva-based visiting UNHCR Director of International Protection Services George Okoth-Obbo, and the two held a number of joint events.

13. (SBU) UNHCR BRIEFING: On the morning of March 12, A/S Sauerbrey reviewed UNHCR's strategy to protect and assist displaced Iraqis in Syria with Okoth-Obbo and UNHCR Damascus office staff. According to UNHCR Representative Laurens Jolles, at least 1 million Iraqis live in Syria, with approximately 20,000 to 30,000 arriving each month. Most of the new arrivals are seeking third-country resettlement, he said. UNHCR is increasing its programs 20 times this year, opening a new registration center in the Duma neighborhood of Damascus, as well as an office in Hassakeh in northeastern Syria where more than 10,000 displaced Iraqis now live. UNHCR hopes to register 200,000 Iraqis by the end of 2007, or more than 140,000 persons this year. Additionally, it hopes to refer 7,500 individuals for resettlement in third countries. At the same time, Jolles stressed, that UNHCR is seeking to tone down public statements about resettlement, as it is an unlikely option for all but the most vulnerable Iraqis.

14. (SBU) The February visit of UN High Commissioner Antonio Guterres helped alleviate SARG suspicions about the international community's goals in helping displaced Iraqis in Syria, Jolles asserted. Syrian officials continue, however, to hold a range of views on whether the SARG should permit the provision of assistance, particularly via international NGOs and on how to manage that assistance, Jolles said. The Syrian ministries of Education, Health and

Higher Education have yet to sign up for a total of USD 8 million in cooperative agreements UNHCR is prepared to provide, but Jolles expected that will happen within weeks. No international NGOs are officially registered in Syria and are unlikely to be registered any time soon, he said. Rather, they are slowly being permitted to work in a semi-legitimate status, usually associated with church organizations and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent.

15. (SBU) Okoth-Obbo discussed the lead up to the Geneva conference in April, stressing the need to respond effectively to the regional crisis of Iraqi refugees, including showing international appreciation for SARG generosity up until now. He also explained that a key internal question for UNHCR has been whether to attempt to formalize what the SARG is already practicing or to "let sleeping dogs lie." The confusion and panic caused by the SARG's recent (and now-aborted) efforts to fully enforce its immigration policies had convinced UNHCR to attempt to formalize SARG policies on admission. UNHCR continues to push the SARG to accede to the 1951 Refugee Convention and, as recently as two weeks ago, the SARG had indicated accession was near, according to UNHCR officials (ref B). However, Jolles said that it seems more likely that the SARG will either pass national legislation on refugees or sign an MOU with UNHCR to provide a legal framework for the treatment of refugees here, postponing accession to the Convention. Jolles also asserted that neither the SARG nor the KRG were likely to allow entry to Palestinians from Iraq.

16. (SBU) BRIEFING WITH UNHCR PARTNERS: In the afternoon of March 12, A/S Sauerbrey met with members of UNHCR's four implementing partners: Caritas-Syria; the Syrian Arab Red

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Crescent; the Christian-based Ibrahim Khalil center, which runs a soup kitchen and a medical clinic; and the Christian-based Bon Pasteur group, which runs a small shelter and does vocational training for vulnerable women. Officials for all four organizations stressed the overwhelming number of needs among the Iraqi community, particularly among women and children.

17. (SBU) BRIEFING WITH AMBASSADORS: In the evening, Charge hosted a briefing by A/S Sauerbrey and Okoth-Obbo for Ambassadors from the countries that provide significant assistance and resettlement support to UNHCR. Okoth-Obbo briefly discussed the April 17 Geneva conference, noting that Syria planned to participate. Ambassadors queried the A/S about the political significance of her visit here and possible next steps. A/S Sauerbrey responded that she had come to Syria to discuss assistance and resettlement issues linked to the Iraqi refugees, noting that the next step in this regard would likely occur at the Geneva conference. Several of the participants reviewed their own countries, efforts to assist refugees in Syria. Two confirmed the SARG was totally intransigent on the issue of resettlement for the Palestinians trapped in the no-man's land between the Iraqi and Syrian border gates at Al Tanf crossing.

18. (SBU) DINNER WITH UN AND INTERNATIONAL AGENCIES: The night of March 12, Charge hosted a dinner, attended by UN heads of mission and representatives from international and local organizations such as the International Office for Migration, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, and the Aga Khan Development Network. The Director of the MFA's Department of International Organizations Muhammed Faysal al-Hamwi also attended the dinner.

19. (U) A/S Sauerbrey's delegation cleared this cable.
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